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Literary Pieces

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Information Resources

Special Collections Flyer

Literary Pieces

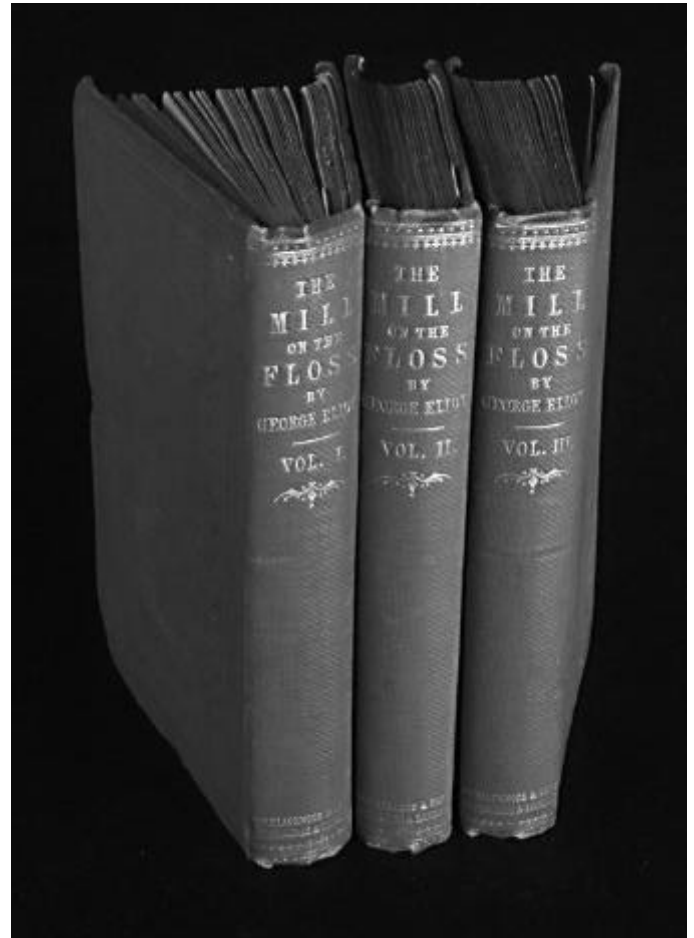
A student sits reading for an assignment in her Victorian literature class, paperback, or perhaps even Norton Critical Edition, in hand. What's missing in this reading experience? Most probably a sense of how the author arranged his or her story to take advantage of two important ways many English mid-nineteenth century novels were published, as "triple-deckers" or "part-issues," or indeed sometimes both at once.

Special Collections contains many examples of the Victorian three-volume novel, or "triple-decker," as it is commonly called. After Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* was published in 1814 by Constable quite accidentally in this form—three volumes happened to be what the work required—it became the dominant one for novel publication throughout most of the nineteenth century. (Special Collections owns a copy of this work.)

Some of the blame for the continued existence of triple-deckers, and the indirect blame for part-issues, lies with English circulating libraries of the day, particularly Mudie's Circulating Library, one of the leading renters of books to the middle classes of Britain in the 19th century.

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The emergence of commercial renting libraries such as Mudie's in the early 19th century, which in turn was a response to increasing middle class literacy and the cheapening of printed materials through the mechanization of printing processes, had odd economic consequences. (The picture in the United States at the same time was entirely different—much more democratic, which is to say, chaotic.)



GEORGE ELIOT. THE MILL ON THE FLOSS. LONDON:
BLACKWOOD, 1860. FIRST EDITION

The libraries had a good deal of clout with publishers. They found that the three volume novel allowed them to rent the same novel to three different people at the same time, and they used their purchasing power with publishers to keep the retail price of books artificially high. The standard price of a three-volume novel remained at 31s 6d through the century, a quite substantial sum. Readers of modest means—an increasing portion of the public—were, as a result, forced to rent from the circulating libraries.

The three-volume form for which most novelists wrote during the century also dictated a certain

amount of structure to the work. A reader was more likely to move on to the next volume if the one he or she had just finished had some plot “hook” to encourage further reading. The student reader mentioned earlier cannot understand fully the plotting of a Victorian novel without examining this issue. Classes in Victorian literature periodically meet in the Special Collections reading room in Linderman Library to undertake just such an examination. Novels of Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Bulwer-Lytton, Sir Walter Scott, George Meredith, Capt. Marryat, George Borrow, and others in three-volume format are available for study.

Issuing a novel in parts was much less common, and was in fact limited to works by Charles Dickens and a few others. In addition to other forms of publication, the young firm of Chapman and Hall decided to issue Dickens’ first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, in 20 monthly parts, to be sold at 1 s per part. Publication began in 1836 and was completed the following year.

This mode, which did much to encourage Dickens’ popularity, enabled readers who wanted to buy, not rent, these novels, to do so, in effect, on the installment plan. Parts 19 and 20 were issued as a double number and sold at 2s, and included title page and preliminaries, and often extra plates.

Part-issues have tended not to survive, particularly in fine condition, unlike triple-deckers, which are relatively common. In the first place, they were protected only by paper wrappers. In the second place, readers were expected to take the full set of parts to their binder and have them put in permanent covers. In this way they lost their identity as part-issues, along with the illustrated paper covers and the interesting advertising pages inside.

The authors who were published in this way faced the same problem as did those who wrote for the triple-decker format. Each part issue also needed some

sort of plot device for encouraging readers to go on to the next part.

Special Collections owns four sets of part-issue novels: Charles Dickens’ *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) (shown here), *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *Oliver Twist* (1838), as well as Trollope’s *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1862). This novel was issued in 32 parts to be bound as two volumes, an exception to the general pattern.

Part-issue publication remained an exception, but the triple-decker held on to its dominance until the very last decade of the century, when the whole edifice of high novel prices controlled by circulating libraries collapsed of its own anachronistic weight.

– P.A.M.

[Special thanks to Steve Lichak for shooting the digital photographs.]



CHARLES DICKENS. *NICHOLAS NICKELEBY*. LONDON: CHAPMAN AND HALL, 1839. PART ISSUE

Special Collections is pleased to have an exhibition of its books in the permanent gallery of the Lehigh University Art Galleries in the Zoellner Arts Center. The exhibition includes a volume of Audubon’s *Birds of America*, along with eight other books illustrating the role of books in physical and intellectual exploration. The gallery is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday, and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday.

Special Collections materials are available for research and consultation without restriction. For further information contact Philip A. Metzger, Special Collections Librarian or Marie Boltz, Special Collections Assistant. Reading room hours are Monday through Friday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. or by appointment. Telephone: (610) 758-4506; fax (610) 974-6471; e-mail: inspc@lehigh.edu.